

Julia M. Gossard, *Young Subjects. Children, State-Building, and Social Reform in the Eighteenth-Century French World*, Montréal, QC (McGill-Queen's University Press) 2021, XIV–272 p., 5 fig. (States, People, and the History of Social Change, 3), ISBN 978-0-2280-0565-0, USD 80,00.

rezensiert von | compte rendu rédigé par
William Monter, Evanston, IL

This investigation of various institutions and policies for making the children of the urban »honourable poor« into useful subjects of Louis XIV is split into two disconnected sections occurring during the same period. Its first four chapters center on the creation of parish-level *écoles de charité* in Lyon, offering both a solid education and forms of vocational preparation until children were old enough to join the organized labor force. This system quickly spread throughout much of metropolitan France (especially Paris, which monopolizes Chapter 4) and lasted until the Revolution. Its last two chapters explore various efforts during this period to export poor French children directly to colonial North America or even farther, ending with botched attempts starting in 1698 to send a few children to Siam (p. 194–199).

The author's dogged search for »agency« among these »children« and vivid examples of French »Orientalism« in its sixth chapter seem typical of current American fashions. Gossard has indeed found a few remarkable examples of agency among some older eighteenth-century adolescents. When the Mississippi Company rounded up Parisian *filles à la casquette* for shipment to Louisiana, some of them staged violent riots to avoid boarding ship. In one, six girls were shot to death, while over half of a large contingent of indentured girls and boys escaped successfully (p. 161–162). A gentler freedom was available to teenage boys training at the *École des langues* attached to the French Capuchin monastery in Constantinople: off-campus, they could idiosyncratically blend French and Turkish clothing (p. 188).

But such privileges, let alone physical resistance, were unknown to the thousands of French children attending these *écoles de charité*. For about a century, the system apparently worked satisfactorily, recycling many surviving children of the urban working class into economically useful subjects. As Gossard shows, vocational training at La Trinité in Paris usually led to stable employment; almost 75% of 5,129 children registered there from 1672–1791 got formal apprenticeships, while most of the rest got quasi-equivalent positions as they aged out (p. 144).

The often random survival of relevant records makes tracking their subsequent lives extremely difficult. »Of the nearly six thousand names from enrollment records [at La Trinité] [...]



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen
Historischen Institut Paris |
publiée par l'Institut historique
allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)

only fifty-three children can be traced to adulthood«, Gossard acknowledges (p. 142). Even her occasional »success stories« suggest that such alumni remained as poor as their parents; as the author admits, »in no way were these schools meant to increase social mobility« (p. 73). At Lyon, Gossard's example never rose beyond the level of journeyman (p. 44–46); at Paris, he simply shifted his vocational training from his father's by clothing people instead of feeding them. The institutions examined here trained an economically useful working class for Old Regime France that was *rangée*: tame, obedient, and immobile.

Gossard's book encounters the well-plowed field of Old Regime French demography only in the first section of Chapter 5, describing the well-dowered *filles du Roi* who were shipped to New France beginning in 1663 in order to (pro)create a critical mass of colonial settlers as rapidly as possible. The price was right, the demand great. When the subsidies stopped because Louis XIV went to war, its purpose had been achieved: Canada's »French« population had almost quadrupled. This level of success far surpassed that of any other program described by Gossard: 98% of the first 761 teenaged *filles du Roi* reaching Canada married within three months, and only two of them never married (p. 153). But their substantial royal dowries (averaging 180 *livres*) were clearly fundamental to its success. By contrast, the teenage girls sent to Louisiana in 1719 had no dowries and thus no future; they rioted in order to avoid boarding ship.

Old Regime French demography suggests that Gossard's »Young Subjects«, the children of its »honourable poor« who populated these institutions, must be understood as fortunate survivors whose productive adult labor was necessary in order to maintain the economy. Their life expectancy was distressingly brief. Nearly half had died before their fifth birthday, while various diseases and accidents killed another fifth of the survivors before they could enter the adult workforce. The treatment of lower-class foundlings and orphans in Paris has been compared to an infanticide machine. Here we catch a glimpse in 1759, where one of Gossard's model successes was also the only one of three orphaned siblings of a Parisian master baker to survive more than three months in institutional care (p. 142).

Minor but real improvement in overall life expectancy in late eighteenth-century France helps explain why these institutions had some difficulty placing their students even before 1789 (p. 200–201). Gossard astutely notes in a poignant epilogue that when reforming French education, the victorious Revolutionaries replaced Catholicism with patriotism as their moral compass; but at the same time, »much of the plans for primary education (ages 6–12) were lifted directly from the Lyonnais *règlements*« of the 1670s (p. 203). However, vocational training disappeared from the classrooms of older students: *la République ne formait plus d'apprentis*.



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen
Historischen Institut Paris |
publiée par l'Institut historique
allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)